

The Lack of a Purpose

John R. Seeley

Source: *The Clearing House*, Vol. 34, No. 7 (Mar., 1960), p. 410.



John R. Seeley 1913-2007

Whatever else an educator must face, he must confront his inability to transmit to his charges any meaningful value system that will be valid in the long run. He must learn to recognize that this impotence is due not to some special defect in him or them, but to the human condition at this instant or perhaps to the human condition as it may be forever.

Not only must the educator confront this central fact, but he must confront the fact that,

whether or not his students can put into words what they feel, they already perceive or feel the fateful vacuum in and around them. They already act in the face of the facts-with anger and aggression in the blackboard jungle and with a more polite sabotage of self and society in the new suburbias.

The only weapon that will not serve in this conjuncture is pretense-pretense at a vision we do not as yet have, pretense at holding an older faith, on which we no longer act because we no longer can. It is useless, too, to absorb ourselves in the game of "Blame? Blame? Who's to blame?" Mutual recrimination between generations, between home and school, or even between proponents of various political and educational views is all profitless. The differences that divide us are pygmies compared to the giant dangers we confront together.

The expression of this view comes close to a declaration of bankruptcy. In the absence of a commanding philosophy or a gripping religion, all education is carpentry-shoring up a defect here ("we need more scientists and engineers"), putting in a window there ("we must have public financing of the education of select students"), but incoherent, planless, defensive, *ad hoc*. To go beyond carpentry, we need architecture; but architecture presupposes purpose; and purpose, in any ... great sense, we do not have.